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# Labor's Responsibility to the Community

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PROMOTION of the common welfare is equally the duty of all classes of society. "Each for all and all for each" is the only acceptable ideal for any commonwealth. All just rights, whether of individuals, private groups, or the community, are sacredly to be guarded; yet in every clash of economic interests those of a merely private nature must invariably yield to the demands of the common good. Such are the first principles of social life on whose recognition human welfare depends.

There is clearly no difference in the binding force of these principles as they apply to capital and labor. Yet in each case they carry with them a distinctly different group of responsibilities. Those only which concern labor's relations towards the community are under discussion in this article. It is not possible, however, to treat of these without occasional reference to the collateral responsibilities of capital. Together they are like woof and thread of one fabric.

To the observer acquainted with the almost invariable indifference displayed in our day by capital and labor alike towards the common welfare, when personal or group interests come strongly into play, the social code set at the head of this article may appear more idealistic than practicable. It can readily be admitted that such will, indeed, be the case so long as religion is left out of count. To attempt to reconstruct society upon any other foundation than that which God Himself has given can end only in the erection of social and industrial Babels. Reason and experience teach us this.

Higher sanctions are required than sociology and legislation alone can afford.

## THE MEDIEVAL GUILDS

Yet that the observance of the code I have outlined is not impossible can readily be made clear from a brief consideration of the medieval guilds which are now attracting the attention of social students throughout the world. They are doubtless the best instances of labor's fulfilment of its responsibilities to the community. A short description of them from this point of view may serve as the best introduction to our subject.

In carefully studying the statutes of a vast number of medieval guilds, nothing impressed me more strikingly than the paramount consideration everywhere given by them to the public good, and the constant subordination to this of both personal and group interests on the part of the guildsmen. These workers were not merely producers. They both made and sold their products. The inexorable elimination of the middlemen, wherever possible, was only part of their wisely premeditated plan to prevent high prices and preserve for the worker a reasonable remuneration. Similar restrictions, successfully confining the expansion of individual manufacturers to the limits prescribed by the common good at that stage of industrial development, made private ownership possible for every craftsman who by training, character, and thrift, proved himself worthy. By this vision and foresight the medieval craftsman served both his own interests and

those of the community. With changed industrial conditions, new applications, it is clear, must be made of the same unchanging principles. The purpose of the guildsmen was always the widest diffusion of private property and industrial control, together with the best service of the public.

Responsibility towards the community was further manifested by these guilds of craftsmen in their scientific systems of relief and prevention, in the hygienic regulations often drawn up by them, in the methods of avoiding the modern plague of unemployment, in the building of bridges and the repairing of roads, in the promotion of municipal, charitable, educational and religious enterprises of every kind. It was manifested even more strikingly in their insistence upon just prices, the rightful adjustment of wages, the proper protection and training accorded to apprentices, and the examination of tools and prevention of night work that no defective wares might be offered the consumer.

Yet in all these regulations, approved by public authorities and firmly enforced by the guild courts and officials, these workers seemed mainly concerned with placing restrictions upon themselves in the interest of the community. They possessed the intelligence to understand that after all they themselves constituted the bulk of the community, and that in safeguarding just prices, fair wages, true weights, measures, and qualities of goods they were ultimately promoting their own interests. The dominant question never was "How much can we safely demand?" or "How little can we give for what we receive?" They rather searched their consciences to ascertain what they might consider a just, but also a sufficient remuneration for their labor, and what amount

and quality of service the public should rightly be accorded in return.

Like all things human, the guilds had their faults and shortcomings, their centuries of high achievement and their stages of gradual decline. Yet such as here described were the ideals they sought to follow in their long period of splendid development based on Christian principles. Offenses against the common welfare and labor's responsibility to the community were even then committed, but they were promptly punished by the guild itself, and no false class or group consciousness was permitted to shield the offender. This was true so long as their religion remained the inspiration of the guildsmen.

#### APPLICATION OF GUILD PRINCIPLES TO LABOR TODAY

"All this is well," a laborer may perhaps reply, "but we, unfortunately, have fallen upon other days. You are picturing the period of brotherhood and medievalism. We are living in the iron age of capitalism and the machine. We are organizing and fighting for our rights in a jungle war where religion does not count, but the dollar is almighty. The iron heel of an industrial czarship is set upon the neck of labor unionism itself. In those earlier days there was joy in labor. Men had hopes that might in time be realized. But what are we save the dull slaves of the machine in an age that thinks of nothing but dividends, and reinvestments, and still greater dividends?"

All this sounds plausible and in a measure is but too true. And yet the same high principles can be followed by labor today, and hopes not unworthy of its dignity can be realized even in our age of large scale industry and mammoth enterprises. But in seeking to achieve its highest aims let labor

never shirk its responsibilities to the community. It is true in many ways that men must find their lives by losing them, even as did the medieval guildsmen. So far from wishing to restrict the guilds, municipalities not seldom eagerly promoted or even demanded them. For in the best days of guildhood these organizations were a surety of honest treatment. Today, labor's full compliance with all its obligations to the community will be no less the safeguard of labor unionism, even as the scandals of a few disreputable leaders or lawless members, allowed to go unpunished by organized labor or even perhaps defended by it, bring disgrace and possible failure to the entire cause.

#### LABOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE COMMUNITY

But what are labor's responsibilities to the community? Let us briefly consider them as they come to mind.

*Fidelity to pledges.*—The first to suggest itself is inviolable fidelity to its pledged word as given under no wrongful social compulsion. Every trouble that arises out of dishonesty or any other offense, on the part either of labor or capital, is likely to cause inexcusable harm and suffering to the community. In its violation of pledges capital has often sinned shamelessly and scandalously. We have still fresh in mind the broken pledge of the coal operators and their pitifully specious excuses. But labor too has its own sad record. It is not my purpose to balance these transgressions, but they rightly alienate public sentiment. Unreasonable as it is, I have known men to be prejudiced against the entire organized labor movement owing to broken contracts on labor's part, apparently overlooking the monumental offenses of capital.

*Moderate demands.*—In the second

place, responsibility to the community implies that labor's demands be kept strictly conformable to the public good, whether there be question of wages, hours of work, or other subjects of industrial dispute. Again let us hasten to admit that the great incentives to excessive demands are the robber methods of so many trusts and corporations, the enormous gains expressed through highly watered stocks and unjust prices, the greed for interminable dividends, the exploitation of the people by cliques of unconscionable bankers in control of some of the country's most necessary services, and the unearned income often spent in luxury. Says a writer in a Socialist publication:

So long as human parasites enjoy huge unearned incomes no demand put forth by a group of producers can be considered excessive. If the locomotive engineers of America, for instance, should demand a yearly wage of \$100,000 they would have an infinitely better moral title to this sum than the young tailor's models who stroll about the streets of New York and supply copy to harassed fashion editors.

To grow indignant at labor's excessive demands, when such may be made, and ignore the excessive gains and violations of stewardship on the part of capital, is morally dishonest. Yet all employers are not unjust and all profits are not excessive, while the exploitation of the public that is certainly practiced often enough by capital cannot justify an equal exploitation of the same suffering public by such sections of labor as may find themselves in a situation to prey upon their fellows. It is the public, let us understand, which must pay the ultimate cost of the excessive demands, whether of capital or labor, or both combined, and the public signifies mainly the great body of workers and their families. The excessive wages of

one group of workers are finally drawn from the purses of the economically weaker groups. Labor cannot correct our economic abuses by becoming a party to them. Until we can bring about a more reasonable system than the present, a system of coöperation based on the widest diffusion of private property, both consumptive and productive, let us by all means do all we can to restrict the usurious gains of those capitalistic interests that act without conscience or remorse, but, while doing so, let Christian capitalists and laborers keep their own escutcheon white. There is a just ethical wage, which does not exceed what an industry can bear, as there is a just ethical price.

What is true of excessive wages is equally true of unreasonable demands regarding hours or conditions of labor. Well-meaning employers are often harassed to death by the silly and tyrannous exactions of labor organizations or business agents. Reputable business men are damaged regardlessly because unions quarrel among themselves. Output is scientifically restricted to the extent at times of driving honest contractors into bankruptcy. Conscientious workers are forced to slacken the services they are but justly rendering. By the latter practices the public is no less surely defrauded than by the most shameless methods of stock-watering, since in either case the community must pay for what was never given to it. What matter whether there is question of capital-stock or labor-stock, of drawing profits or wages? In either case, no equivalent is given for the money exacted from the long-suffering public.

*Just cause for strikes.*—In the next place let me call attention to the question of strikes. No one can deny to labor the right to strike any more than the right to unionize. Both

must be firmly maintained by everyone who has a sense of democratic freedom and of Christian liberty. It is not the weapon of the strike, but its unwarranted or wrongful use that constitutes a violation of labor's responsibility to the community. I may be pardoned for briefly quoting from my volume on *Democratic Industry*, (p. 354), the ethical principles regarding the ordinary strike or lockout.

Strikes are permitted for a grave and just cause, when there is a hope of success and no other satisfactory solution can be found, when justice and charity are preserved, and the rights of the public duly respected. Conciliation, arbitration and trade agreements are the natural means to be suggested in their stead. Hence the utility of public boards for this purpose. As in the strike so in the lockout, a serious and just cause is required, and the rights of the workers and of the public must be respected. Charity is far more readily violated in the lockout than in the strike, because of the greater suffering likely to be inflicted on the laborer deprived of his work than on the employer.

The immense suffering likely to result both for the workers and the community from the sympathetic strike, and the injustice that may be done to innocent employers, make clear the care with which moral principles must be consulted before taking recourse to such a measure. The subject, so profoundly involving the interests of the community, is too complicated to be entered upon here. For a discussion of it, I may refer to McLean's (*The Morality of the Strike*) or to my own chapter upon it in *The World Problem*.

There is much more that might here be said upon such intensely vital questions as the limitation of apprentices, the closed union as well as the closed shop, when admission is made unduly difficult, the extension

on the other hand of union privileges to the unqualified, and an endless series of such like problems in which the public welfare no less than personal rights of individuals are at stake. But the principles already laid down must suffice. The laws of Christian charity and of social justice must be observed no matter what may be the provocation.

*Choice of leaders.*—From all that has been said one thing stands out clearly. It can no more be overlooked than a mountain promontory blazing in the noonday sun. It is the supreme responsibility of labor in making choice of its leaders. The union is confronted here with a social no less than a personal responsibility. Its "business agents" must be worthy of the enormous trust confided to them, and its high officials more than self-seeking politicians. Not merely have the former often proved themselves morally unfit, while some few of the latter have even been outright criminals, but in spite of the jail-bird character of such men, they not seldom counted a large following and were strongly intrenched in their unions. "Big Tim" Murphy of Chicago, arrested and indicted scores of times, and sentenced for complicity in mail robbery, was still thought good enough to retain his position as president of the gas workers' union. Similar instances might be multiplied, and worst of all, capital itself has set its hired spies within the unions. These men invariably seek for positions of leadership that they may the more effectually play their Judas' part and demoralize the labor movement. No one regrets such conditions more than the honest laborer, but regrets cannot suffice. They will not correct the evil, which is a public menace wherever it exists.

In this same connection, let it be firmly said that there is too much condonation of lawlessness. I have a

right to say this, since no one has more carefully pointed out than I have done in repeated articles the unfairness displayed towards labor unions in the charges of violence brought against them, and the false judgments passed upon them by the public. Yet it is a fact, for instance, that even after those murderous crimes committed by the McNamaras had been openly confessed and punished, the Indianapolis Iron Workers' Union cast the robe of sanctity around them by proclaiming that "Brother (John J.) McNamara has been for years and still is an *honored member*" of their organization, while it pledged to him and the other "imprisoned brothers" its "loyalty and support."

*Coöperation.*—While much remains to be said, let it suffice to point out in conclusion labor's great possibility of rendering one of the most valuable of all its services to the community by an intelligent support and promotion of coöperation. In this movement labor is fortunately taking an increasing interest. Many hundreds of millions of dollars are yearly handled, wisely and conscientiously, by labor's most carefully selected representatives in the British consumers' coöperatives. Similar developments are taking place in other countries. In America, too, coöperative enterprises of every kind are daily increasing in number and prosperity, although due discrimination has not always been exercised.

The coöperative movement is strictly a workingmen's undertaking. In its nature it is not remotely connected with socialism or Red radicalism, though these may seek to control it. Like the medieval guilds, whose nearest analogy it is, true coöperation is based upon private ownership by the many instead of the few. It has won its way by superior efficiency and not by violent revolution. Let its pro-

motors refrain from ever connecting it with revolutionary propaganda of any kind. And yet it may prove to be the most successful effort towards an intelligent transformation of our system of large scale industry, substituting production for service in place of production for profit. It implies no sudden cataclysmic changes that leave a world sunk in misery, but is a gradual and steady development that spends its blessings as it grows and prospers, like a fruitful tree by the running waters.

I am promising the reader no delusive utopia, no world here below where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. Such did not exist in the days of the medieval guilds and will not exist even in the most perfectly developed system of Christian coöperation in the future. But there is one thing that is essential if we would

approximate as closely as possible to such a happy state, and that is religion. If we look upon man as no more than the developed brute, a conclusion equally abhorrent to science and philosophy, if we remove the Divine from the laborer's horizon, it will be absurd to speak of any responsibilities on his part to the community or to his fellow-man. We can then but resign ourselves to a perennial state of jungle war in which the economically strongest, the most relentless and unscrupulous will survive to continue their selfish quarrel with each other, whether for wealth or power, as the case may be. Let there be no mistake that of all the workers' obligations the greatest is their responsibility to the Almighty Maker. Being true to this, they will be true to themselves and to their fellows. Failing in this, they will fail in all things.